
MERCHANTVILLE REDEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee Meeting #1
March 9, 2015 6PM
Merchantville Borough Hall

ATTENDEES:

Bill Lammey	Mike Wisnosky
Ted Brennan	Mike McLoone
Ryan Middleton	Janet Stevens
Mara Wuebker	Pete Burgess
Karen Foster	

HANDOUTS:

Agenda
Project Schedule

1. INTRODUCTIONS

Group members introduced themselves and provided a background of their jobs, families, community roles, and links to Merchantville.

2. PURPOSE and APPROACH

The Borough has tried to redevelop this site in the downtown two times before. RDG was not involved in those two projects. We are wiping the slate clean and starting from scratch. The Borough asked RDG to help get things going again in the Redevelopment Area and asked RDG to explore grant funding. RDG secured a DVRPC TCDI planning grant for the Borough to analyze existing conditions, facilitate stakeholder redevelopment committee, develop concepts, use variety of public outreach methods to shape alternative concepts, and prepare Amended Redevelopment Plan.

It will be a multi-pronged approach with committee meetings, public awareness/input campaign. We will be posting things on municipal website, Facebook pages, holding a public workshop, posting concepts in Borough Hall with opportunity for feedback. The process will culminate in an Amended Redevelopment Plan that will be adopted by Council. It will first go to Planning Board for a recommendation. There will be public hearings at both PB and Council.

The committee's role is to be partners with RDG, serving in an advisory role to Council. We will be generating concepts, fine tuning concepts based on public input, assist with public awareness campaign. While the Group may not always agree all of the time, the intent is to try to

arrive at a consensus. The tentative schedule is 12 – 15 months. All project work has to be complete by June 2016 deadline. Minutes of meetings will be posted on Borough website.

3. EXISTING CONDITIONS

Physical characteristics of Triangle:

- Borough owns 10± contiguous parcels
- Mix of commercial and residential uses: 7± businesses on E. Centre st, 1 business on E. Park Ave
- 5 dwelling units in triangle (1- 2BR above cigar alley, 3-1BR above 19-21 Centre, 1-2BR above McFarlens)
- Bike Path Amenity on NJ Transit property (former railroad)
- Soil Contamination – (1) PAH near railroad track spurs (coal storage site) and (2) chlorinated solvent near PNC Bank
- 1 lot owned by private entity that would like to include in project

4. RELATED ISSUES OCCURING ON PARALLEL TRACK

- Borough pursuit of Long Term Lease Agreement for a Municipal Parking Lot. Borough has talked to Verizon and Grace Episcopal Church. RDG put together a parking site plan that combines the two lots that was shown to the committee.
- Borough pursuit of Environmental Planning and Remediation Funding –the Borough's Environmental Planner, ERI, is pursuing Hazardous Discharge Site Remediation (HDSR) grant funds in order to conduct further site investigation studies funding for remediation. More grant money is available if reuse will be park or recreation reuse.
- Demolition – the Borough just put out RFP for demolition services for 3 potential sites, the EMS building, the house/commercial space on (9 E. Park Ave) owned by Borough, and the Cummins property (17 E Park Ave). The Borough is filing a Complaint/Order to Show Cause for the owner to show cause that the building should not be demolished, requiring the owner to demonstrate that it is in safe condition.

5. SWOT (STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, THREATS)

The group used a planning analysis tool, called SWOT, to evaluate the site. The group discussed the redevelopment area's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The Goal is to build on strengths, reduce weaknesses, embrace opportunities, minimize threats to the extent feasible.

Strengths – What is good about this area? What does it do well or make it unique?

- Land Assembly - Borough owns a lot of parcels in Redevelopment Area (so has control over what can do with it)
- Bike Path (nice feature and an amenity that can brings a density of users)
- Bus stops for NJ Transit on Centre and Chestnut
- It's a manageable project size

- There is a significant amount of road frontage
- It's pedestrian friendly
- Seasonal Farmer's Market is going to be located along bike path in the northern part of redevelopment area
- It's in the center of town, and middle of the region
- Architecture of nearby buildings (Centennial House, Train Station, McFarlans)
- Unique character of cigar alley cut through /McFarlan's Market
- New opening of Station Coffee House (a destination that could create more synergy b/w land uses)
- Socio-economic diversity
- New sending high school arrangement will Merchantville more desirable for families
- Timing – we are not going into a recession

Weakness- Challenges for the Redevelopment Area

- Triangular Shape makes more challenging to develop
- Awkward Park Avenue/Chestnut Intersection
- People don't shop locally - Suburban mentality for shopping needs (go to big stores instead)
- Community Demographics – there is a high poverty level, so these community members will not have disposable income to go to high end stores or to take art classes, for example.
- Past iterations of the Redevelopment Area has bad connotation for some people
- Pocket of residential on Park Avenue (twins) don't fit in with downtown feel.
- No main road effect (lack of visibility) – the downtown is tucked away in the middle of Pennsauken and Cherry Hill
- People drive through and do not stop in the downtown (also drivers going to too fast)
- Older housing stock age in Merchantville is expensive to maintain (will filter down to
- Suburban parking attitudes that people want to see front door from where they park, even though distance may be the same or less to walk to destination
- Narrowness of Park Avenue –current on-street parking is undesirable to drivers
- Soil Contamination issues – more costly to develop, take more time
- Vacant PNC Building – (unknown current condition of long vacant building; not knowing how much parking new user will desire, particularly if a corporate user)
- Liquor license limitations, based on population and one is already in use

Opportunities in the Redevelopment Area

- More commercial uses (bring more draw to downtown; more retail synergy)
- More residential uses (will provide built-in consumers for convenience and services in downtown)
- Upscale housing – people who will have more disposable income to frequent downtown
- Mixed-use buildings with street level shops and residential above
- Conference space
- Semi-public gathering space with active programming that will bring in visitors, customers, create a buzz (not another Morrissey Park that may look nice, but doesn't create an attraction)
- Install Fitness connection to bike path

- Install improvements, such as roundabout, at Park Ave/Chestnut intersection to improve circulation
- Enhance pedestrian friendly environment of downtown, including create unique pedestrian connections (Cigar Alley, decorative archway), linkages to bike path.
- Reuse of former bank building in a compatible way
- Install Unique features (ex. Haddonfield has dinosaur)
- Widen Park avenue to accommodate on-street parking
- Excitement; creating a buzz
- To augment the tax base
- County liquor license availability
- Market rate housing

Threats- Things that can Hinder Redevelopment's Success

- Costs of clean-up of contamination (if too costly or will take a long time)
- Amount of Energy that is needed to make the project come to fruition
- Not staying focused
- Suburban parking mentality
- Objections to any community contributions that would make project attractive to a developer (like a tax break)
- Cummins property (potential cost or litigation)
- Competing areas that are trying to do same thing in the region who will be competing for the same developers and for the same 'buzz'
- Verizon and/or church not wanting to enter into lease agreement with Borough for parking lot (will limit what can do on Block 29)
- Not having a shared vision - Committee, Council, and public not being on same page throughout life of redevelopment project
- Unpredictability for a Redeveloper – the Redeveloper needs to know what it can expect in terms of consensus of public opinion, challenges of site, anticipated costs, Borough's expectations, and anticipated incentives (if any) to entice him or her to invest time, money, and energy into a project
- New development that doesn't fit in with the character of downtown

Other Matters Discussed

There will be a parking analysis of existing businesses/residences on block and anticipated parking needs of what will be proposed for redevelopment site. The group loosely discussed building height for the redevelopment area, which will be explored in later meetings. The group also discussed whether there is possibility for structured parking, but it is believed to be too costly. The group also discussed potential names for the redevelopment project. There is a desire to tie it into something that has roots or links to Merchantville, if possible. One name that was suggested was Cattell Centre. The group is going to think about potential names for the project and bring ideas to next meeting. We may have a contest or have the public vote on potential names at the public workshop, or on facebook, etc.

6. NEXT MEETING

The next meeting date has not been determined yet. RDG will send out email to committee members. It is anticipated that we will be articulating goals for the Redevelopment Area and start to craft concepts.